

Jungle Rot

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Summary: A oneoff about a squad of Marines setting an ambush in the jungles of Stockholm II. Reviews needed.

Jungle Rot

This is a one-shot about a Marine fighting on a jungle planet against the Covenant. Enjoy!

We took turns at the point. In the jungles of Paris IV, the underbrush was so dense, the vines and creepers so solid, that the point Marine was soon worn down. Every five or ten minutes, as we pushed through the dense jungle; single file in five metre intervals, the second man in line moved forward to relieve the point man and his machete. Already breathing a little easier, the first man dropped back to the end of the file.

There was another, more important reason to alternate on point. In those murderous sparring matches that occurred in the jungle, the Covenant-if they spotted us before we spotted them-would invariably take out the point man first. It was a grim business of Russian roulette. Yet it was a duty that no Marine tried to shirk-it was a grim necessity of war in the jungle. No officer or private was more than equal.

In battle too, we shared the task. For the 4th Division that task began in December 2545, when we wiped out the Covenant in the 15th sector (better known by the ground-pounders as The Swamp). We then moved on to destroy their patrol HQ 15 klicks south. Convinced we had acquitted ourselves well, the high brass sent a flock of Pelicans and Albatrosses to ferry us to a rest camp on nearby Abernon VI. But we were back in action on Stockholm II within a week. The 1st Division, under strength because of monumental losses the year before, had been pinned by the Covenant during an attack on Tulagi Ridge. Sent north to help them out, we were dropped in a few miles south of Tulagi and camped a few days while waiting for a Marine Division to be inserted for re-enforcements. We had ranging patrols every day, in every

direction. Some patrols were engaged, and we lost more point men.

As a corporal in the 3rd squad, Delta Company, I was always being roped into jungle patrols, and had plenty of turns on point. My luck was good. But there were those whose luck had run out. Private Meyer late one afternoon was on point and was hit three times in the chest by a Grunt-portable plasma cannon. We lost Corporal Meyer at point next day to a Jackal sniper and a particle beam through the neck. Other companies were taking losses too; light ones in the grand scheme of things. But the spectre of taking point each day, even for just a few minutes several times during a patrol became so nerve-shredding that we longed for a frontal assault on the Covenant to get it over with.

Not only were the patrols deadly, they were a source of irritation as well. Why, we wondered, did the Covenant always go for the point man first? The practical way to conduct an ambush was to kill most of the Marines and let the point man pass by with a few others before springing their trap. But when the Covvies went for the point first, the patrol would drop into a skirmish line and throw return fire through the undergrowth, often making them charge in fury and get cut down almost instantly. On the forth morning, Captain Prendergast (more commonly known as Captain Clink; as he was reputed to have cast-iron balls, though no-one ever said it to his face) sent our company on a dawn patrol in the swamps below the ridge, which were full of Covenant. If the Covvies hadn't bugged out, we were to surprise them with, as Clink put it, with an "arseful of hot lead."

Not as happy about the patrol as Clink, we shoved through three to four klicks of jungle and marsh without anything much more dangerous than a swarm of mozzies. By late morning, we returned to the camp and flopped into our shelters with a euphoric sense of relief. While the rest of the company grabbed some chow, I went to get the jungle rot on my legs seen to. In six or seven places, some deep, pus-filled abscesses were forming, each bigger than a S2 sniper bullet. After sterilizing them and pumping them full of biofoam with a hypodermic; which stung like a bastard, he told me I was fit to return to duty. As I slung my M-7 SMG and drifted back to the Delta foxholes, I ran into Josh Werden, a friend from boot days. The only men in our sixty-man camp to volunteer for our Division, he and I had gone up to a boot camp on Reach and been good friends ever since. Not long after becoming a Marine, he had also joined the Scouts and Snipers Platoon and had adapted so readily that he was now considered the most skillful marksman in the Division.

"Moe!" he said. "Just the guy I'm looking for. I need one more gunner for a ten-man patrol Colonel Barret wants me to take out."

"What?" I replied. "Goddamn Josh, why me? There's plenty of other Marines who've been sitting on their arses all morning."

"Two reasons" said Werden. "You can shoot straight, and you know your stuff."

I understood the first reason. I could shoot so straight that Division Staff paid me an extra fifty creds a month.

Still desperately trying to escape the patrol, I hitched up my combat trousers and showed him the jungle rot. Werden gave the ulcers an

ugly glance.

"Hell Moe, that ain't nothing. The sting'll make you run faster."

I tried once more. "I just got off patrol" I said. "Been out since first light."

Werden just laughed. "Good. You'll be all wound up and ready to run." He paused a moment.

"Your SMG will give us five M-7s, three MA5Bs, and two BR55s. With all that firepower, we could take on the whole goddamn Covenant armada."

I wasn't so sure we could even take on one squad of Covvies, but I had run out of arguments.

"Where're we running?"

"Not far," he said. "A few klicks along the ridge."

The crude maps we had showed that the ridge rose about a klick above the surrounding swamp and traveled straight east all the way to a big Covvie troop concentration about ten klicks off. "Yesterday afternoon I found a trail a few klicks east," Werden went on. "Barret wants us to follow it as far as we can. The Covvies are supposed to be getting ready to make a big push." He paused again and looked at my M-7.

"You got ammo for that thing?"

"Five clips," I said. "Nine hundred rounds."

"Frags?"

"Two in my pack."

"Well haul ass and find some more. We're heading out in ten."

Ulcers forgotten, I went off to scrounge six more grenades and tell our platoon leader I'd been sucked onto a combat patrol. Then I trotted back to the south side of the camp where Werden and his patrol were gathering.

"OK," Werden was saying, "single file, three metre intervals. I'll take the point."

No-one said anything. It was understood that when Josh Werden led a patrol, he took the point and kept it. Even in the trackless jungles and swamps, Werden seemed to have an instinct for picking the path of least resistance. And whether in deep jungle or on a narrow trail, he could sniff out Covvie ambushes with eerie accuracy. In fact, Werden had been dropped in from a Pelican weeks before either the 1st or 4th divisions landed on the island and had scouted an area of about 15 klicks square. Now he glanced at his watch.

"Barret said to take off at high noon. We got five minutes."

As we milled around waiting for the last few minutes to tick by, I noticed for the first time that Werden had a sheathed plasma sword

fastened to his pack. I pointed to the hilt.

"Where'd that blade spring from, Josh?"

Josh grinned. "Borrowed it from a red Elite at Paris IV, he ain't gonna need it no more!"

He checked his watch again. "Let's go," he said, "before Colonel Barret bugs out and calls it off."

Off we went through the light undergrowth along the ridge until, about 2 klicks east, we hit at narrow trail. On that trail we moved fast, a klick at a rapid trot the Marine Corps call double-time, another klick at a fast walk and so on. It was the way of the 4th division, a pace that took a lot of stamina, but ate up the miles.

At times only a trace through the trees, at others perhaps a metre wide, the trail held to the ridge line, curving here and there with the natural contours of that rough land but heading generally east until, about five klicks out, the ridge took a sudden swing to the south. Here we stopped for a breather. So far, of the Covvies, we had seen and heard nothing. As we rested, Werden scouted ahead before returning in a few minutes. "Cut the pace to a steady walk," he said. "I'm going on alone for a few klicks. No need to worry about an ambush. If there's one up ahead, I'll know it before they see me. Give me ten minutes and then come on." He gave us a half wave and took off up the trail on the run. An hour later, still moving steadily south, we rounded a turn in the trail, and there stood Josh Werden. "Whoa," he said in a low voice. "Company's coming. Covvie patrol. They'll be here in about twenty minutes. We better get ready in a hurry."

"Damn!" said Private Akers, our point man. "How many?"

"Fifteen, maybe twenty," said Werden. "We'll stop them right here." He pointed to the jungle on one side of the trail. "Good cover in that stuff. Get in there and spread out about three metres apart. Moe, you stick with me." As our eight comrades faded into the jungle, I followed Werden for a few yards back the way we had come, to the spot where it made its sudden turn left.

"There's got to be a way to make their point man stop right here," said Werden. "Right here at the turn." I knew what was going through Werden's mind. If the Covenant point man stopped, the whole patrol would too, and our ambush would be provided with fixed targets. Werden stood there thinking it out for a few more seconds, then unhooked the plasma sword from his belt. He ignited it and admired the blade for a few second before plunging it into the ground. It quivered there, a shaft of sunlight dancing on the purple blade. "There!" said Werden. "That will stop any squid-chin in the Covenant! The bastards love their blades more than their own mothers."

He trotted off to check the ambush team down up the trail. "Good," he said, just loud enough for us all to hear. "They won't see you till it's too late. Get those safeties off. When I whistle, spray the bastard in front of you. Don't stop shooting just 'cos they're down. Reload and kill em all over again!"

He turned to me. I had already melded into a thicket of vines. He

shoved in a metre to my left. "I'll take the lead Elite and the two behind him. You spray on down the line."

In the silence we waited, hearing for a long ten minutes. Then, from some distance down the trail, the sound of approaching footsteps-heavy and rapid-until, like a pack of animals, the Covvies were there.

They were moving fast, the Grunts, Jackals and Elites of that patrol-not in the shambling run the Grunts often used, but a purposeful march. Their armor was painted matte black, and they radiated a certain purposefulness not found in normal Grunts. The two Elites, one at each end of the line, wore the gold burnished amour of the high castes. The five Jackals scattered through the patrol had the more powerful orange-tinged shields of the commanding ranks. The whole patrol was heavily armed. Five Grunts were holding shoulder-mounted light plasma cannons, and two more with the powerful fuel-rod cannons; the rest had needlers. All the Jackals were holding plasma pistols. But the Elites had two red-tinged plasma rifles, and energy sword hilts hooked into their belts. The entire patrol was carrying plasma grenades. All of them were hard-faced veterans. It was evident in the way each of them carried their weapons, not loosely, but gripped tightly and sweeping the jungle as they moved.

Their leader rounded the corner at a jog and came to a sudden halt, as if he had run into an energy field. His beady eyes were carefully assessing the sword. Behind him the whole patrol crashed into each other; momentarily, the entire patrol was off guard and confused. Werden chose this moment to attack. He whistled, clear and intense. As one man, our patrol reacted-a sudden fury as the jungle erupted with flying lead; two hundred rounds from our M-7s, three hundred from our MA5Bs and sixteen rounds from our BR55s. The aliens were slammed on each side, held up by the hail of lead and minced. The Elites spun to unholster their swords, shields flickering, but in seconds they winked out under our fire, then they crumpled, torn nearly in half by the inferno.

Our ambush had been near perfect; but not quite. As we tore the patrol apart, one more Jackal had appeared on the scene. He must have been lagging behind and been running to catch up. His momentum carried him into the field of fire; a few men hit him and he staggered; but his shield took the brunt of the fire. It winked out, and the Jackal dived into the undergrowth and disappeared. There was a collective sound of clicking as we all released our empty clips, reloaded and yanked the charging handles. We stepped onto the trail to inspect the fallen, gun muzzles still smoking. They were all sprawled; torn up and awash in their fluorescent blood. The lead Elite would probably have had a look of surprise and anger on his face, had it not been torn apart by a well placed burst of 7.62mm.

"One got away, Bill," said Akers.

"I saw," he replied, "I'll get him. You guys search these bastards. Moe, make sure you check the leader. And with that, he disappeared into the jungle after the fleeing Jackal. I tore open the leader's armor pouches, and relieved him of his two plasma grenades and his plasma rifle. It was a beautiful piece of work, glowing slightly and finely sculptured. I stuffed them in my pack for trading, if we ever

got out of here. A sudden, alien scream lanced through the jungle. Evidently Josh had caught up with the absconding Jackal. By then I had relieved the Elite of his plasma sword as well. Those things were heavy, no good for a human to use, but they were great trade bait. In a few minutes Werden was back, wiping blood from his combat knife. He and the rest of our patrol walked along the line of shattered aliens making certain that no wounded Covvies were left to shoot us in the back. They were all so minced and torn though; there was not much of a chance of life. Werden spoke up. "Pull these bastards up into the jungle," he said. "Maybe the Covvies will never find them. All they'll know is that one whole patrol has disappeared off the map." When we had finished cleaning up, I pulled the plasma sword out of the curve in the trail, and handed it back to Werden. We both admired the flickering purple blade; it had done its job well.

Darkness engulfed us before we were halfway back to camp. We spent the night in the underbrush on the side of the trail. Although it was unlikely the Covvies would come looking for us, we split up a watch throughout the night. Lying there in the darkness, it occurred to me that those Covvies were probably veterans of many fights. They might have fought across several worlds. And then, a curious thought crept into my head. Whatever their murderous histories, their intent, they were professional soldiers, just like us. It was a shame we could not have co-operated with each other. Months later I would tell Josh of the fleeting thought that had come to me that night along the trail. He would think a moment, and then say "The trouble with veterans is they get too sure of themselves. They get to thinking they'll never die. They're setups for surprise."

Hope you enjoyed it. But please, don't ask for me to continue, this is strictly a one-shot. Thanks for reading!

-Timthesoulmantaylor

End
file.